



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



Photo by Paweł Młynarczyk

**Bilingualism; creation and migration;
homes and nostalgia: Art and Life with
Joanna Kurowska: A Polish-American
perspective**

Sunil Sharma

*Knowledge about ways of being eaten
is implied – if not conceived –
in a butterfly's design,*

*time of death depending on which part a beak
captures first – a wing or a leg,
the head or the trunk.*

.....

*Does the butterfly have a choice? a life
yielding half-beauty to the world it fans
with a half-wing?*

*Death, life, satiation, hunger – for an insect
things can only be black or white,
even in shades*

A Butterfly Caught in the Frame of a Harley Motorcycle

Joanna Kurowska is a typical American success story. Born in Poland, migrating to USA; teaching in university, writing in English Conrad-like late in life; getting recognition in adopted country and finally rest of the English-speaking world through her unique poetic voice, blogging and public engagements.

A creative life summed up in third person:

Bilingualism; Creation and Migration; Homes and Nostalgia: Art and Life with Joanna Kurowska: A Polish-American perspective. Sunil Sharma.

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Joanna Kurowska is the author of seven critically acclaimed volumes of poetry, Stained Glass (coming March 2016); Intricacies (coming November 2015); The Butterfly's Choice (Broadstone Books, 2015); Inclusions (Cervena Barva Press, 2014); The Wall & Beyond (eLectio Publishing, 2013); Obok : Near (Oficyna Literacka, 1999, Poland); and Ściana : The Wall (Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 1997, Poland). Her poems, flash fiction, and scholarly work have been published widely in American and international journals, such as Atticus Review, Bateau, Christianity and Literature, The Conradian (UK), Episteme (India); International Poetry Review, Journal of Religion and the Arts, Kultura (Paris), Levure littéraire, Room Magazine, Slavic & East European Journal, Southern Quarterly, and elsewhere. Kurowska has taught at American Universities, including Indiana University, Bloomington, and the University of Chicago. She is the recipient of scholarly and literary awards, including Bruce Harkness Young Conrad Scholar Award, Kościuszko Foundation Stipend, Pushcart nominations; Jerzy Popiełuszko National Poetry Contest Award; and others. Joanna Kurowska currently works as an independent scholar and writer. Website: <http://joanna-kurowska.com>

Sunil Sharma converses with her on a range of allied issues in this e-mailed interview.

Q: What prompts a person to leave securities and seek foreign shores?

A: Generally speaking, people have been always restless, leaving the familiar for the unknown. Gilgamesh, Odysseus, the biblical Israelites, and many others are all symbols of this. Historically, people have been leaving or forced to leave because they were kidnapped and transported as slaves, deported in ethnic cleansings, escaping from political oppression, pursuing material gain, running away from troubles at home. In my time/geographic space people leave to study, get a job, or seek an adventure, as they have done for centuries. The grass is always greener on the other side, right? One should keep in mind that historical displacements can haunt individuals and communities years after they took place. Take Henry Louis Gates, the African-American scholar, who centuries after his ancestors were brought to America, sets off on a journey to Africa to investigate the continent's ancient history and then show it in his film *From Great Zimbabwe to Kilimatinde*. My own father, who was deported as a little boy from his family home in pre-war Poland into to the Soviet Union, had been returning to those experiences over and over in his writing; and of course his deportation affected the lives of the entire family, generation after generation, in a 'ripple effect'. The overall result of all those migrations is our ever-growing sense of displacement as well as the awareness of 'somewhere-else-ness'.

Q: What made you leave Poland and immigrate to USA? The American Dream?

A: The second half of 1980s in Poland was the grey aftermath of the martial law, which General Jaruzelski's regime imposed on the Polish society in 1981, in order to contain the civic freedoms brought by the *Solidarity* movement. Passports were difficult to obtain, people struggled economically. Having an opportunity to leave for America was generally

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considered a smile of fortune. I did not foster any 'American Dream' but like many Eastern Europeans in those times, I idealized American democracy, while being largely ignorant of the country's deep economical, social, and racial divisions. I was simply driven by my spirit of adventure, eager to discover the new land, learn English and computers, and write a book. Since I was leaving with my seven-year-old son Paweł, I also knew I'd have to find a job quickly and place my boy in school.

Q: How was the entire experience of migration? New homes replacing old ones?

A: I would not speak of the experience of migration in the past tense. 27 years after emigrating, I still feel I am on a journey. Homes do not get replaced; they change, like the landscapes seen from a train. Emigrating increases one's sense of the transience of all things – but that's an experience we all share, no? I recall people from my parents' – and then their parents' – generations, who have lost absolutely everything as a result of war or some political turmoil. So change and the sense of instability are ingrained in the Polish soul, so to speak. Emigration does entail some profound loss but it is also enriching for it situates one's consciousness outside of the ever-changing circumstances; it teaches one to observe. It's a life-long lesson. In the end, home is not so much a particular place but the people with whom one connects.

Q: Could you relate to America as an immigrant? Your poem 'The Day I became American' celebrates a different America? A land enriched by the labour of transnational labour?

A: America is simply a place in which I live, so I try to maintain my efforts at learning more about its traditions, idiom, and culture; all of which affect me directly. American problems become increasingly present in my poetry, because they are my problems. The poem 'The Day I Became an American' depicts some key points of my American journey, hence the only America I know – as a mother, writer, and worker. The word *telling* in the poem is in italics, stressing my ability to converse *within* those social roles, in their own language which is also my language. The acquisition of idiom allows me to understand better my adopted homeland. My understanding may be limited but it is 'first hand'. As for the 'second-hand' knowledge about America, I've been acquiring it through reading. For example, while studying Tennessee Williams, I gained some knowledge about the South, its history of slavery, poverty, Ku-Klux-Klan, etc. This helped me better to understand modern American divisions, and see how all that affects me, in part also by the aforementioned 'ripple effect'.

Q: How did you deal with the problem of language? You learnt English late. How did you control a foreign language?

A: Indeed, I did not speak English at all until my thirties (I had French, Russian, and Latin, while in school). When I received the invitation to come to the US, I took some English lessons. My father, who was fluent in British English, would come several times a week and teach me elements of English grammar. I came to America with about 400 words. Soon after

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my arrival I started to write articles for Polish-language journals in Chicago, for which I used English-language sources, so that my vocabulary was growing fast. My ability to converse in the language came later. Understanding spoken English has taken the longest, especially regional accents, like New England or Southern. Also, to learn the language faster I deliberately chose not to live in a Polish-language community, though I appreciated my contacts with Polish speakers. My routine interactions in the post office, grocery store, doctor, school, etc. were lessons of everyday English. In terms of my becoming an English-language writer, my research was the turning point.

Q: Problems of bilingualism?

A: Bilingualism in itself is a great intellectual and cognitive enrichment. Some challenges have emerged in terms of relating to traditions, like Polish poetry versus English/American poetry, as well as my alleged 'choice' to write in English (I put 'choice' in quotation marks because to me writing in English feels like a natural consequence of my living in America and thinking in English). Because of globalization, I think the pressure that writers work in their national languages is less strong than fifty years ago or earlier. Multiculturalism is increasingly considered an asset, though some find it limiting, claiming they can never get to the 'core' of one specific culture. Living in America, I could not possibly remain unexposed to my surroundings, unless I built a wall around me. Perhaps identification with one particular tradition could have made my professional path more defined, easier; for example, if I specialized in, say, just Polish literature. But as a poet I had no choice but to relate to my own migration and to the surrounding reality, the latter presenting itself to me through a particular language (English), local imagery, and my creative intuition.

Q: How did you start writing in English?

A: By playing with the language. Almost immediately after my arrival to the USA, I translated excerpts of texts into English. It was bad English but it absolutely fascinated me to see Polish phrases rewritten in the language. Sometime later I got a job as a teacher and hence took several college courses in education, all of which involved observing live children and their behaviour. Contrary to my worries, my professors praised my lengthy reports very highly, and that early experience of writing in English became an important step. During those years I also continued to write and publish in Polish. When I decided to do research on Conrad, I immersed myself deeply in English language and literature. That was my longest break from writing poetry. After about five years of working on Conrad, I started to pencil short poems in English, usually on the margins of the books I read. When I finished my dissertation and was finally able to turn to poetry (in 2005), poems started to pop up in English.

Q: How has been the experience as an English writer?

A: Similar to writing in Polish. First an idea for a poem (some call it 'epiphany') comes to my mind. Shaping it into a poem feels like responsibility, much in same way as performing one's

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tasks is a responsibility in any other profession. An unwritten poem can ‘nag’ me for a long time until I write it. Such was the case with my recent poem ‘The Girl in a Pink Dress’ that depicts the violence to which both my parents were exposed during World War II. Writing this poem felt not only like an artistic challenge but also as a *professional* obligation. With regards to practicalities, I’ve striven to acquire some knowledge about American literary tradition (this process continues); and to gain some orientation as to the functioning of the US literary market.

Q: What is bilingualism for a writer? An asset? Or a liability?

A: It is a double-edge sword. I think the key issue is distance. Migrant writers may have deep understanding of human issues but may lack the backyard view. Potential readers may prefer a narrower perspective because such perspective is theirs. They want a writer who sees what *they* see, in *their* yards; one who experiences *their* emotions – be it hatred towards an opposite political camp, the anger at growing taxes, the heat of the gun-rights defense; or the many colors of racism. The writer does not have to share those emotions (some of them can be poisonous) but needs to *know them*, so that through her writing she can help others to understand them. Modern America is incredibly divided. I have personally witnessed an educated person calling another American a ‘Nazi’ simply because that American did not support her political views. This shows to what extremes the political divide had gone. If a bilingual writer can step from his/her broader multicultural perspective into a local backyard, then the same multiculturalism can turn into an asset because the distance it implies will allow the writer to understand the emotion while providing just the necessary quarter-of-an-inch distance from becoming reduced to the level of calling a fellow American a Nazi.

Q: Are you able to capture the nuances of English as efficiently as a native speaker?

A: I am not a native English speaker and will never be, because Polish will always remain my first language. There is something very subtle about the names one identifies for the first time during childhood. My favorite example of this is the moment when Helen Keller – who, as we remember, was deaf and blind since her infancy – connected the sensation of the stream of cold water, with the word *water*, as her mentor Anne Sullivan was signing it on her hand. Once Keller connected the name with the sensation, her human potential got liberated. For some reason, for me such ‘charged’ word is the Polish *słońce* [pronounced ‘suointze’] – ‘the sun’. Compared with the English *sun*, the Polish word will always contain for me that something unique and difficult to describe, which refers to a child’s unique sense of order/permanence of things. For me as an English-language poet, the word *sun* will always denote something renamed, its original name being a different one. However, the newness of the English *sun* lies in the fact that I look at it not as some ‘absolute’ entity – the sun – but as a *word*; and that in turn is something my original experience of *słońce* cannot contain. This allows me to go back to the Polish word and view it ‘secondarily’ not as ‘the sun’ but as a *word*.

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Q: Does not English as a second language pose challenges? How did you overcome those as creative person?

A: I miss emotional connections with many particulars of the surrounding world. For example, I have no sentiment whatsoever towards the *Jolly Rancher* candies or a hot-dog celebrated during a baseball game. I can approach those entities only by comparison with my parallel native experiences; and of course by conversing with people, who grew up in America and understand the magic of a *Jolly Rancher* or a baseball hot-dog. The challenge is constant, for the fabric of culture is extremely intricate. One encounters such ‘particulars’ while reading newspaper articles, poetry, novels, or just talking to people. Like any other limitation, I try to overcome this by learning.

Q: Bilingualism for a writer can be complicated. S/he travels two lands and cultures in mind and practice. Does it enrich your creative process? Your idiom?

A: I have already described the assets of bilingualism, as I see them, so now I will just add that language does not exist in a void, it outlines and represents the culture of a group of people living in a given geographic area. In other words, where two languages meet, two cultures meet. Mikhail Bakhtin says that only when a person learns about another culture, can she or he fully understand their own. As culture progresses, it forever differentiates, and hence increases in complexity, like evolution. The meeting of two cultures engenders a third culture, even if just within an individual’s perspective. But an individual interacts with other individuals, so this goes forever. I think the ultimate pursuit of culture is not aesthetic but moral. The point is not to *have* a ‘Mona Lisa’ but to *see* it – not with just a physical eye but in an insight, understanding. Art is to better us, not in terms of imposing any norms – that would be didacticism, a no-no in art – but to make us more reflective, more human. So yes, learning another culture is enriching, although it also means that one has to give away something of one’s own preconceptions, to make room for those of another.

Q: For a successfully transplanted writer, migration and naturalization can be productive. Agree?

A: Migration and naturalization, success or the lack thereof in exile – are all parts of human experience. Someone has to experience them first hand, so that they can be described in writing.

Q: How Joseph Conrad happens to be a life-long obsession for you?

A: My serious encounter with Conrad happened relatively late in life, which reminds me of my conversation with Philip Conrad, the novelist’s grandson, whom I met at one of the Joseph Conrad Society’s conferences in London. Asked which his favourite novel was by Conrad, Philip confessed that at the age of 17 he attempted to read *Nostromo*, but could not develop sufficient interest in the narrative. My first encounter with Conrad’s prose was similar. At the age of 19 I tried to read *The Rover* in a Polish translation but the novel seemed

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very intricate. I matured to Conrad later in life, already as an immigrant. The fact that he, too, was an exile – and a Pole immersed in an English-speaking environment – was part of the allure. Even more so, his deep insight into human nature, combined with wisdom and compassion. I admire Conrad's masterful irony which creates layers, and layers, and layers of meaning we will continue to discover and discuss.

Q: Do you regard yourself as his literary daughter?

A: A disciple, perhaps? Conrad has been my great teacher. Reading his fiction allowed me to branch out into philosophy, English literature, theory, history. Conrad provided me with endless opportunities for aesthetic/moral insights. My idea of aesthetic seeing combined with moral insight was inspired by his famous artistic manifesto: 'My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you see!' I am not sure what my poems make readers 'see,' but intuitive/moral insight together with aesthetic wonder is the essence of my poetic endeavour. The 'Harley butterfly' in the poem quoted at the beginning, is an example. Seeing that butterfly engendered many thoughts, e.g. about the ultimate incompatibility between Nature and civilization, the state of prolonged entrapment in an alien environment, or designifying culture by appropriating its traditional symbols for commerce.

Q: Your scholarly views on the relevance of Conrad in the post-empire world?

A: From whichever angle one looks at Conrad, it would be impossible to enclose this writer within any fixed identity. He is a novelist but also an accomplished sailor with the rank of captain. Counted by F. R. Leavis as belonging to 'The Great Tradition' (of English literature), he is considered by some as the heir of Polish Romanticist literature. He is a European but an 'Easterner,' and after 1870 many 'Westerners' did not consider territories east of Germany to be part of Europe. He is native of a 'colony' (partitioned Poland) but then works in the service of the world's most powerful colonial empire. He declares himself as a practicing Catholic but elsewhere he expresses his dislike of the Christian religion. Some, like Chinua Achebe, accuse Conrad of being a racist, others, like Peter Nazareth, believe he upholds non-whites. Conrad's Europeans do not return home with diamonds after having civilized effectively some alleged 'savages' – as most of the heroes of the nineteenth century adventure fiction do. Instead, they emerge from Europe already corrupted and further deteriorate in the 'exotic' lands, which they neither understand nor respect. Yes, I believe Joseph Conrad will continue to be read and reinterpreted for years to come.

Q: How far is Polish literary tradition indebted to Conrad?

A: This question surprised me at first, for a large group of Conrad scholars in Poland ask, 'How far is Conrad indebted to the Polish literary tradition?' Indeed, many point out his indebtedness to the Polish romanticist literature, which in turn reinforces Conrad's constant presence in Polish literary discourse. In other words, if I can prove that the poetry of Adam

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Mickiewicz or Juliusz Słowacki reverberates in Conrad's works, this means Conrad is 'one of us' and hence should be discussed in the context of Polish literary tradition. So it works both ways. Conrad has been discussed extensively in Polish literary studies, Conrad motifs taken up in Polish literature. During the Second World War, young fighters considered some of Conrad's characters as their role models – particularly Lord Jim. Echoes of Conrad's fiction can be found in the works of Czesław Miłosz, Jerzy Andrzejewski, Jan Błoński, and many others. So the connections are very strong, both ways.

Q: What is the role of nostalgia for a migrant writer?

A: As every emotion, nostalgia can be destructive or constructive. It is constructive when it becomes the subject of reflection. For me personally, it has triggered reflections regarding identity and a person's connections with time/space; as well as my efforts to rebuild (insofar as possible) what emigration has destroyed.

Q: Do we as migrants seek out old homes and territories in new places?

A: That would seem futile. I believe we can only approximate 'old homes and territories,' for example by some traditional celebration organized for children in an ethnic school (whereas those same children struggle to 'fit in' in their peer groups, in their regular American schools). Regardless of their social or financial status, many immigrants admit they never feel entirely at home; never fully belong. I consider no stage of life to be finite, so that my sense of closeness or distance to a given reality fluctuates *usque ad finem*. Like tradition, every moment of life is a composite of evolving and overlapping experiences; as such it is alive, an opportunity to learn. A general reflection: change is ingrained in the very substance of being human but something in us wants to 'stay forever'. We like to think, we don't belong to death, but maybe we just don't belong to stagnation?

Q: Are you an American or a Polish now at this stage of your life and career? Have you assimilated successfully? Or adopted an aggressive posturing?

A: The answer is 'both,' to both, though I would be reluctant to embrace bitterness implied in 'aggressive posturing'. I miss many things in my native country but the fact is that most of my adult life I spent in my adopted homeland; and would probably miss it if I moved back to Poland. So I am a Polish-American. As previously outlined, successful assimilation implies the state of some finality which I do not share. On the other hand, being a published poet – if being a poet must be my 'condition' (to use Robert Frost's term) – means a fulfillment of my earliest dreams. So yes, I have adapted successfully, in that I am doing what I've always wanted to do. Also the fact that, while being a single mother with practically no English or resources, I completed a doctorate and taught successfully for many years at prestigious American universities, gives me a sense of accomplishment. But in terms of being able to make a living, it has been a struggle for all those years. So it all depends how one defines

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'success,' what one's dream is. Again, I am happy to do what I do, against all the odds. This perhaps is the real American Dream.

Q: Sum up your writing career, its highs and lows.

A: With seven books published (and favourably reviewed), I consider myself a seasoned poet. However, as I have mentioned, my *American* writing 'career' started relatively recently. As a result, I experience some of the anxieties of a novice, especially considering that I haven't been 'channeled' by any university writing program ('channeling' is Geoffrey O'Brien's term). I continue to learn what it actually means to be a poet *hic et nunc*. Many aspects of this career amount simply to hard work that has little to do with writing – like researching the publishing market, building a network (from scratch, in case of immigrants), book promoting, facing competitiveness and possibly politics when it comes to the distribution of grants, using social media on the Internet; and the hard fact that poetry is not a widely-read genre. All these things are distractions. Finding my voice in writing, getting published, and receiving feedback from readers, are my 'highs'. Uncertainty and occasional sense of speaking to a 'wall', are the 'lows'. Ultimately, this too is part of human experience, and as such food for poetry.

Q: Your favourite book?

A: There are many books that I love, so it's always a difficult choice. Presently I'll mention the *Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, in the 2007 Marvin Meyer's edition. The volume is a collection of myths that emerged in Gnostic communities between the first and third centuries. Meyer's edition contains English translations of 52 Coptic codices that were found in a clay jar near the town of Nag Hammadi in Egypt, in 1945. Since Gnostic ideas were practically eradicated by the church by the end of the third century, prior to Nag Hammadi any information regarding those myths was largely limited to the commentaries by the Church fathers, who refuted them. I find both the story of the recovering of those codices and the myths themselves, fascinating.

Q: What does writing mean to you?

A: A job to do; a transformation of the raw, chaotic matter of life-experience into aesthetic form; reconciliation with my deeper self ...

Q: Is American literary scene different from the Polish one?

A: My interactions with the post-communist Polish literary world have been limited to the 1990s, when some of the benefits literature enjoyed under communism still lingered. While the system was admittedly oppressive, in the communist Poland literature had received immense subsidies from the state. This meant that the rule of profit that expects a poetry collection to compete with products like coffee or hair-dryer did not yet fully encroach. While already in the US, I developed some interactions with Polish literary critics and journals, and

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published in Polish. Then I took a break from creative writing in order to complete my doctoral research. After 2005, when I returned to writing poetry, I found the Polish literary market (as seen from a distance) resembling the American situation, with large literary houses inaccessible to satellite poets; small presses emerging and disappearing; and most publishers giving priority to mystery novels and cookbooks over poetry. As everywhere, there is an avalanche of writing (especially on the Internet), so that it seems every other person conceives the idea of publishing a book. The American market seems to me more open in that small presses still cover the publishing costs, though they expect writers to engage heavily in promoting their books (I am told that in Poland even the well-known authors have no choice but to cover the costs of publishing their work).

Q: How is writing in Polish different from English? Is it more natural?

A: Writing in English feels like a job I am skilled to perform. I should add, at least 75% of all my writing has been written in English, my scholarly work included. Presently writing in Polish feels more like play, a pleasure. As a writer and scholar, I feel more strongly connected with English, but I suppose my 'most inner self' is still attuned to Polish. I enjoy translating from one language into the other.

Q: Is reception to you in Polish more welcoming than in English?

A: I was already in the USA when my two Polish-language poetry books appeared in Poland. The books were noticed by the critics Adriana Szymańska and Leszek Szaruga in the 1990s. I also received a substantial (monetary) award in the Jerzy Popiełuszko National Poetry Contest (in 1994); and published in the prestigious Polish language journal *Kultura*, in Paris. In 2009 and the years that followed, the Polish literary critic Andrzej Gałowicz wrote several scholarly essays and reviews about my poetry. Also since 2009, I have translated most of my English language poems into Polish, and sent them to some literary journals and publishing houses in Poland but those submissions were never replied to. Exceptions are the quarterly *Fraza* and the e-zines *Pisarze.pl* and *Zeszyty Poetyckie*, and I would like to use this opportunity to thank them very much, for it is my strong wish to remain connected as a poet with my native country. English language journals seem more receptive in that most of them keep the courtesy of responding to submissions, which is commendable even if a submission gets rejected. I am happy to add, most of the poems from my most recent book *The Butterfly's Choice* have been translated recently into Romanian by Dr. Olimpia Iacob, and published in leading literary magazines in Romania.

Q: Are memories of the Soviet occupation there in Polish writing?

A: After the collapse of communism in the Soviet-dominated Poland, this topic ceased to be a taboo, so now there is an abundance of writing about the Nazi/Soviet occupation of Poland, the mass deportations of Poles to Russia in 1940 and 1941 by Stalin's orders, the Ribbentrop/Molotov pact dividing Europe between Stalin and Hitler, etc. A memorable

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example is Andrzej Wajda film *Katyn* depicting the mass-murder of about 20,000 members of Polish army officers and intelligentsia, committed by the functionaries of the Soviet Union. As I mentioned, my father, Bohdan Kurowski, was deported as a six-year-old boy – together with other members of the family, including his mother (my grandmother) – to Kazakhstan in 1940, in a cattle train, and remained in Russia until 1946. Father passed away in 2009 but he had recorded his memories on cassettes. I have recently finished editing his memoirs. Many of the shocking facts and historical truths they depict have moved me very deeply, finding echoes in my writing.

Q: Your university career. Was it fulfilling? Any lessons learnt?

A: My university career followed two tracks, one of them being my job as a foreign-language instructor, the other my research. I taught Polish full-time for 13 years at the University of Chicago, and 18 years at a summer language workshop at Indiana University. I enjoyed teaching Polish very much, for I had truly superb students. Simultaneously – and independently – I was conducting research at another university, the University of Illinois at Chicago; and working on poetry. The subject matter of my doctoral work was the ‘European’ identity of Joseph Conrad – who had originated from a country dominated by the Russian empire but then worked in the service of the British Empire. I was investigating the tension those two experiences engendered in Conrad’s fiction. That research was extremely fulfilling. Since in my workplace there was practically no room for me to grow in the other two of my areas of expertise (research and writing), my career as a foreign language instructor concluded and at present I work as an independent scholar and writer.

Q: What does a butterfly signify to you as a woman and a writer?

A: Butterflies do recur in several of my poems, but so do bees, cats, birds, and other animals; also plants. Nature’s beauty has always inspired awe in me, whereas its ruthless law of life having to eat life in order to survive triggers deep compassion. Being out of balance ourselves, we people try to kick Nature out of balance; thus ever increasing the already excessive suffering. That’s one thing animals seem not to do – increase suffering beyond what’s necessary to ensure their own survival. I think it’s a great lesson we should try to learn from butterflies, bees, crocodiles, snakes, cockroaches, and any other species. With regards to Nature’s beauty, I perceive it as symbolic. In much of my writing I have attempted to decipher – or give meaning to – the ‘glyph of beauty.’

Q: Please sum up your own books for us? Major themes?

A: My books include *The Wall & Beyond*, *Inclusions*, *The Butterfly’s Choice*, *Intricacies*, *Stained Glass*, and two poetry collections in Polish. My poems are typically short, for I always strive for the gist, for pure thought. Wordiness does not work for me, neither in English nor in Polish. In all the books I focus on the visual aspects of things, from which I derive reflections and comparisons, like in that poem about the ‘Harley’ butterfly. The themes revolve around

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the experience of emigration, structures of power, language and identity. Spirituality has always been a strong theme, and I believe all of my books show this. Hence, *The Wall & Beyond* (which is a selection of poems from my Polish books, translated into English) tackles mysticism and my wrestling with Catholicism, whereas later volumes tend towards rethinking the 'god image' and reflect my interest in Gnosticism. *Intricacies* focuses specifically on love; *Stained Glass* recalls my childhood and youth experiences in Poland.

Q: Any advice to writers old and new?

A: My advice is based on what I have learned: hard work and humility. By the latter I mean: Think twice. Observe. Strive to understand. Be aware of your own preconceptions – accept that you have them and don't let them blur your judgment. Writing is not about producing words or getting published, it's not about 'producing' at all. Writing is part of our shared effort to understand better and thus become more gentle, reflective beings. To make us see.

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